

By the Kansas State Historical Society

## The Germans from Russia: The Story of Hays

Germans were the largest immigrant group to settle in Kansas. They came from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Other Germans came from Russia. The part of Russia where the Germans lived is in Europe.

In the 1770s Empress Catherine the Great invited Germans to settle the plains of Russia. She offered the Germans free land and no taxes. She also gave them religious freedom. Many of the Germans were pacifists and did not believe in war. Empress Catherine excused them from military service. The Germans that immigrated to Russia became known as Germans from Russia.

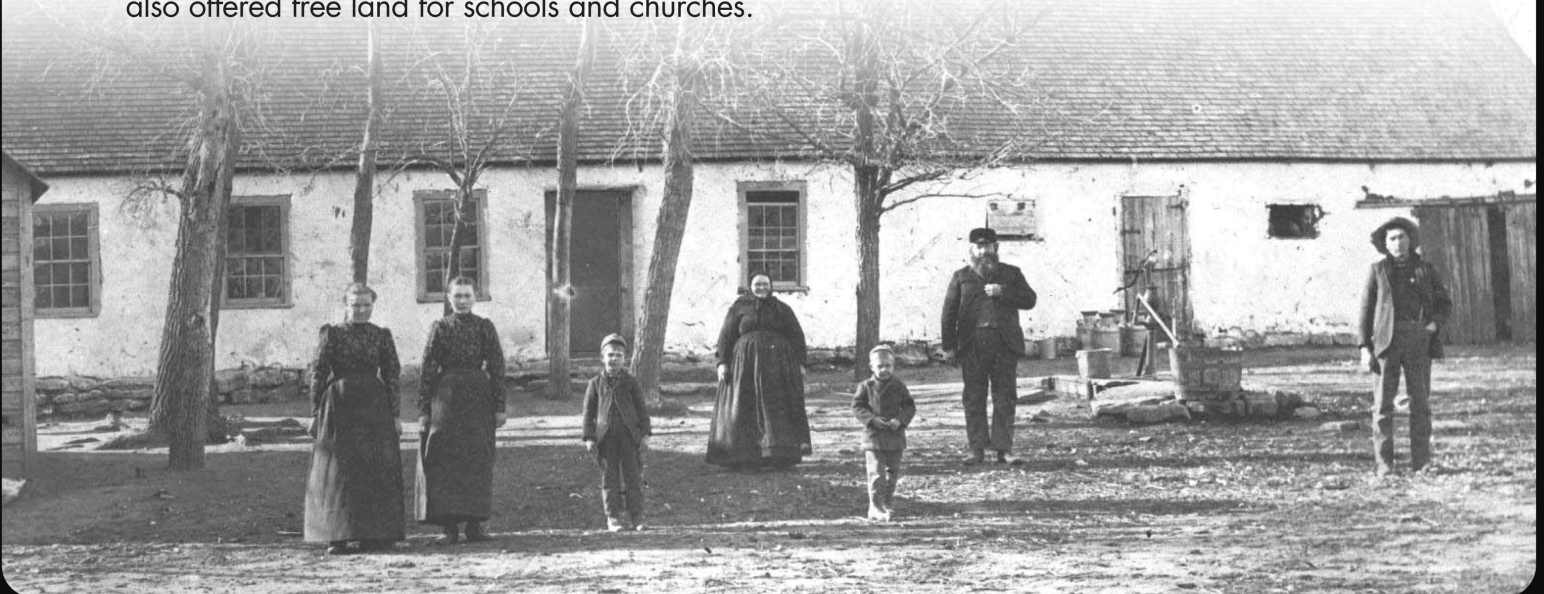
### **Why did they leave Russia?**

For 100 years Germans lived in isolation in Russia. They enjoyed the privileges that Empress Catherine had given them. But things in Russia began to change. The Germans began to lose their privileges. They were unhappy that they now had to participate in military service. The Germans from Russia looked for a new place to live.

### **Why did they come to Kansas?**

In 1872 the Kansas Pacific and the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads started big campaigns to attract Germans from Russia to settle in Kansas. The railroads wanted to sell their lands and services to new immigrants.

The railroads printed advertising materials in German. They sent people to Russia to convince the Germans that Kansas offered them opportunities. They offered the immigrants special sleeping cars on their railroads. The railroads provided free wheat seeds to start their farms. The railroads also offered free land for schools and churches.



# The Continents



Most Germans from Russia were very religious. Some were Catholic, while others were Lutheran or Mennonite. Kansas offered religious freedom. The state also promised pacifists that they did not have to participate in military service.

## What did they find in Kansas?

Germans from Russia settled in central Kansas and the area around Hays. The plains of Russia are similar to the plains of Kansas. These new immigrants adapted easily to Kansas.

The Germans from Russia came to Kansas with experience growing winter red wheat. This is wheat that is planted in the fall and harvested in the early summer. Winter wheat gets moisture from winter snows. Winter red wheat works well on the plains of Kansas.

## What happened to Hays?

Today many of the people who lived around Hays are of German heritage. The area calls itself the German capital of Kansas. The community celebrates its heritage with the annual Polkafest and the German Heritage Days. Each fall the community celebrates its ethnic past at Deutsche Oktoberfest.

